CLAUDIA.

[All the Year Round.]

CHAPTER 1.

The gray wintry day was drawing early to its sullen close, and the thick, low-lying cloud of heavy smoke seemed to drop a dingy veil between the great, ugly, dirty city, with its yellow lights, and the free space of heaven, where the clear blue points of the celestial lamps shone cold and bright above the open face of the country. It was a very prosaic and hideous world which Louis Dumaresq left behind him in the Bloomsbury street as he opened the door of the great dingy house with his latch-key, and made his way slowly up the broad staircase to the second story, where his rooms were. Mr. Dumaresq was no longer young. Fifty years of care and struggle, many a privation and many a trouble had turned his hair white, and his face was lined, thin, and sallow, though his large dark eyes had kept some of the fire and some of the dreaminess of youth in spite of the sunken spaces round them and the fine crow's feet in the corners. No one in London led a more commonplace, toilsome, and monotonous existence, to outward seeming, than he did. For twenty-five years he had worked at a desk in an office, rising from clerk to secretary, earning a small weekly stipend, punctually paid and fairly gained by hard and conscientious work and uncomplaining regularity of attendance. Year after year the silent, reserved, courteous man had taken his seat in the office, as little known and caring as little to give or take confidence as if he were a mere writing automaton, wound up to go from 10 till 5 from Monday morning till Saturday night. The heads of the office, the fellow-clerks among whom he sat, and with whom he exchanged the necessary greetings and remarks which civility and business demanded, knew absolutely nothing of him except that he lived in ——— street, Bloomsbury, and was an intelligent, exact, and conscientious worker.

But he had his other world, like the rest; his romance, his relaxations, his passions, and desires, though most of these had failed and died, and the dull level of a thorny path left few glimpses of brightness as he trod it with patience to the appointed end. There had been a time when his heart had leaped as his hand closed on the latch which would open and give him his vision of home, when home meant a smiling, dark-eyed wife, eager to welcome him, when the chatter of the curly-headed boy on the hearth with his toys had music in it for the man who was tired of the weary routine of the long dull day, and when Louis Dumaresq envied no one his palace in that room where his household gods were. The dark, kind eyes had been many a year put away into silence; he could hardly make his ear exactly repeat the tones of the sweet Italian voice, whose broken English had been so delicious to him. Gemma had been too dear for his possessing long. She left him too legacies: The one was the curly-headed boy, a troublsome possession enough, which he often felt had brought him as much pain as pleasure; the other a picture that hung above the mantelpiece, and which always greeted his eyes as he entered the room with a serene smile of welcome—a little piece of sunshine, a bit of ideal beauty in the dingy surroundings of the prosaic London life, delicious to the beauty-loving, imaginative nature which it was the business of the rest of the day to repress. It was a little Claude, the one valuable possession poor Gemma had brought into her husband's home, an heirloom from an artistic family.

When Louis Dumaresq was twenty-one, the son of a rich banker, brought up to enjoy life and gratify every whim, he had taken a fancy to go to Rome for six months and study art. It was merely a whim; he had no intention of becoming an artist; he had no necessity to be that or anything else; but he had considerable turn for a *dilettante*, and might have done a good deal if he had been poor, and if the world were less overstocked with talent. He painted in the studio of an Italian artist, who was as poor as an artist can be except for two priceless treasures. The one was the Claude, the other his daughter Gemma, who was the prettiest model any father could have, and who, consequently appeared in every one of Signor Riccardi's pictures under one name or another, and who was just eighteen, and at her prettiest, when young Dumaresq painted at her father's studio. Of course he fell in love with her, and she with him. The father encouraged it with a sort of innocent craftiness, the young Englishman being rich and Gemma having no portion and nothing but blank poverty to look to—no portion, that is to say, but the Claude, which was promised to her. Louis Dumaresq came back next year and the two were betrothed. They were married when he was twenty-three, and he took her home in triumph to introduce her to his father, a sleek, prosperous banker, who was apparently as safe a man as the city of London knew. They began life as gayly as possible, with visions of unlimited bliss before them. The Claude was sent over to Gemma when her father died, the year after her marriage, when the brown-eyed baby, who was so exactly like her, was born.

Then came the storm of troubles which after that beat on the poor young things, and destroyed all the fair prospects before them. Mr. Dumaresq, the banker, absconded, and the bank collapsed with a fall that brought ruin on hundreds of homes, and, among others, on his son's. From living in careless ease and luxury they had to come to a couple of rooms, and he was thankful for hard work and a meagre clerk's salary. They were not miserable. Gemma was a bright-natured girl, and used to the economies and plans of poverty. Dumaresq got on by slow degrees, and was respected and trusted. It was not long before they changed the two rooms for the floor in the great old Bloomsbury house, which, in its palmy day's had been a fashionable gentleman's, and still had its relics of dingy grandeur in carved mantel-pieces, broad, solid staircase, and wrought-iron railings; and the Claude decorated the wall above the fireplace and made its own little center of peaceful sunshine and beauty, which was a joy and rest to the clerk when he came in and out of the roar and mud of the streets, keeping alive the lamp of artistic beauty which at one time had seemed to him the load-star of his destiny. He might have made a small fortune out of the exquisite picture which was declared to be an absolutely perfect specimen of the master, but he could almost as well have parted with the boy, whom he used to hold up to see the sparkling waters and the sunny sky before he could speak plain, but not before he could scribble with a slate-pencil with a certain aim in his scribblings unusual at such a period of his life. Gemma's boy was a born artist; he had inherited it from both sides, and she was proud to declare that he would be just like her father some day. Dumaresq shook his head a little doubtfully at her prophecies, and would declare that Clement would never do anything in life till he learned perseverance. The hard task-master poverty had taught it to him, and his strong will was now passed even the power of misfortune to defeat. Clement adored his mother, and she stood between him and his father when there was anything wrong, as there often was. She was so sunny and hopeful that she could never see much harm in his constant bits of naughtiness; and he was always affectionate, and as easy to melt into passionate repentance as to rouse into rages or fits of childish mischief. She was a determined optimist—a bit of Italian blue sky and sunshine, like her picture. Her husband had an odd association of ideas with the two. She brightened the dull places of his life with her blithe hopefulness, as the landscape—which seemed to have been dipped in southern warmth and sunlight—lit up the dingy room and the foggy atmosphere, and collected in itself a point of beauty and radiance. She rested his soul as the Claude rested his eyes, tired of the ugly monotony of the long business day. But the inanimate had a durability which the animate lacked. London could not dim Gemma's heart, but it could steal her strength and health; and, while she declared every day that she was better and going to be well quite soon—unconsciously deceiving him and herself—death was too strong for her, and there came a black nightmare of a day which remained for the rest of Louis Dumaresq's life a shuddering memory of unendurable pain—a day on which Gemma's large, bright, feverish eyes closed on her little world of love, and over which where there had been joy and warmth and hope despair brooded.

He went on, to all appearances, much the same; the office did not see any great difference, for none counted his gray hairs or noticed the lines that had come on his sallow forehead; he went and came as when Gemma had welcomed him; he had to satisfy his hungry soul as well as he could with what she had left him—the boy and the picture that always reminded him of her and the sun of his Italian days. He sent Clement to school. The boy was lovable, with a hundred faults, and had spark in him of a real, but wayward genius—a very uneasy and doubtful possession, which often means worse than failure. He painted and designed "wonderfully" for twelve years old, as everybody said, only he never had the patience to make a correct copy of anything. He played by ear, and sang like a seraph. His father gave him, the first time he had anything like a good report at school, a little violin, on which he soon learned to play with extraordinary facility, and to compose little wild, quaint melodies of his own. He was very handsome, and when he was "good," which was a rare occurrance, his father delighted in him. On such evenings, sitting in his old easy chair smoking, with the boy opposite him, by turns chattering and making strange wandering music out of his little violin, something like contentment came over the tired, despondent, reserved soul of Louis Dumaresq; his severe looks relaxed, and a trace of the old smile which he had given his wife returned as he looked and listened to the eager, clever, dark-eyed boy. He had not much faith in the lastingness of the peace and repose he felt. A deep distrust of the future and a certain suspiciousness of nature, which haunted even his love for the boy, was always underlying the smoothness of the surface; but for the moment he was half consoled, and his heart rested for a space from its eternal disquiet.

Such an evening he remembered always in after years as standing out bright from a sombre background of disappointment and weary monotony of days. He came home rather early, and found Clement in one of his bright, affectionate moods, which came and went like sunshine on an April day. He greeted his father with a boyish hug; he had much to tell of his day at school, and chattered all dinner time—they had a frugal dinner together late—with bursts of laughter in between his sentences which were infectious, and made Dumaresq's thin, worn face light up into something of the gayety of youth. In the evening Clement announced himself in a "playing fit"—sometimes he could not produce a note, and would not touch his violin; sometimes he had a craze for art, and would not lay down his pencil.

To-night, as he perched on a high stool opposite his father, with his legs tucked under him and his violin on his shoulder, he glanced with his great bright, dark eyes first up at the landscape overhead, then at his father, with his bow poised in his hand, ready to begin.

"You are awfully fond of that picture, dad," he said, still gazing at it.

"Yes, if you put it so," Dumaresq answered, smiling, as he watched the rather elfin-looking figure through the smoke of his pipe; "it is more than a picture to me."

"Yes, I know. I remember when you used to hold me up and tell me stories about it and about Italy. I shall go to Italy some day and paint. It is more than a picture to me, too; it has told me something. Listen, dad, I'll show you what it has told me."

And dashing the bow across the strings Clement struck into an air; his father listened with more than his ears; the strange, fresh, sweet little melody went to his heart. The boy broke off suddenly.

"That's the picture, father; doesn't it make you see it? The sun on the river, and the pine trees and the girls dancing—it all dances together, the water and the sunshine and the girls."

"Play it again, boy," the father said briefly.

He could not have praised or expressed any of the painful pleasure which was swelling in his heart; it was impossible for him—a habit of chill reserve and repression had grown upon him like ice over a lake. Years of grinding work, of loss and failure, had made him what he was—the worst companion for the ardent, impulsive, hot-headed boy that Gemma had left behind her. Yet Louis Demaresq loved him, and would have died for his good any moment.

Clement played it again.

"Do you like it?" he asked, impatiently, when the last note ceased to vibrate and his father still said nothing.

"It is pretty; how did it come to you, Clem?"

"Before you came in I was drawing. Look here, see what I did."

He suddenly produced a sepia sketch and put it on his father's knee. It was an enlarged copy of the only likeness Dumaresq had of his wife; a very poor photograph, taken in those days before photography was one of the fine arts. There was incorrectness of drawing, but Clement had made a spirited likeness of the pretty Italian head, with its soft thickness of dark, cloudy hair standing round the thin, oval face; the great, deep eyes, and the sweet, half-open, smiling, pathetic mouth.

His father drew a long breath. He sat and gazed at it, and his heart beat so fast that he could not speak.

The boy went on: "I was trying to make it like to give you, and thinking about her, and then I looked up suddenly, and I remembered your saying once that she and the picture made a sunshine in the room when there was none outside, and, as I looked at it, somehow I seemed to hear the tune. I stared and stared, until I believed I saw it all move, and the man there in the corner play on the guitar, and the girls begin to dance and sing. Then I took up the violin and it came. I played it over and over again. Do you like the drawing, dad?"

He was always eager for praise and approval, but if his father could have spoken out his thoughts, they would have surprised Clement by what would have seemed an extravagance and flattery. As it was, the boy thought his father undervalued him. Instead of putting into words what was in his mind, which was that this child of theirs was a genius, and that at that moment his father loved him passionately, he only said, and it was with an effort that he made even this sound at all warm: "Yes, Clem; yes. I like it very much, and the tune, too. You are a good boy; it has pleased me."

It was but meagre; but he had seldom said so much; and the eager boy was satisfied, for he was not used to praise, nor often felt he deserved it.

In the long, silent night Dumaresq lay and thought over the curious, dainty little melody till he knew every note by heart.

"He is a genius—a genius," he repeated with a warmth that made him feel almost happy, "and he has a power of loving, too. How Gemma would have delighted in it!"

CHAPTER II.

Alas! as Clement grew older, there were fewer of such minutes to lighten the gloomy days. He was not rightly managed, but he was, perhaps, impossible to manage, with his erratic genius; his facility for temptation, his sensuous, impatient nature, swift to love and to hate, swayed here and there by every gust of impulse. He did no good either at the day- or boarding-school to which he went; he fascinated half the boys, and fought with the rest; and all the masters, while confessing him capable of almost anything, united in declaring him hopeless. When he was fifteen his father yielded to his passionate wish to be trained for an artist, and took him finally from school, but he had not much hope of his keeping even in this mind, though, as his master allowed, few boys began with so decided a talent—one amounting almost to genius. Dumaresq was steadily patient with him, but it was a hopeless kind of patience, and Clement felt that there was no faith in him behind it. He fancied there was no affection, either. Here he was wrong; his father loved him, and would love him doggedly through everything, for he had no changing in him. He led exactly the same life, going every day to his office, doing his secretary work with precision, faithfulness, and skill; always unapproachably polite, and even kindly in his intercourse with the men he met, but as absolutely a stranger to them all as if he had met them yesterday; returning at his usual hour to dinner, to an evening spent in his easy-chair, with his books, his pipe, his silent, musing contemplation of the Claude which he loved, as he had always loved it, if Clement were out—as he very often was, for as he grew up he made friends, and loved society and gayety as his father hated it—if he were at home, Dumaresq, who was logical and just, and keenly felt the depressing atmosphere of the home which he could not alter, tried hard to make it interesting for the lad who was shooting up fast into a thin, handsome, delicate-looking young fellow, with a look of his mother in his Italian eyes. He persuaded him to play when he was in the mood, or he interested himself in his drawings; he tried not to be severe or repressive when he talked about his amusements—sympathizing he could not be, they were so unlike. Clement was dull at home; he staid chiefly from a compassionate sense of his father's loneliness and from a certain love which was the lingering relic of his childhood; but sometimes, when one of his melancholy and musing fits came upon him, he found the quiet room resting and a refreshment after the thousand sensations and emotions which he crowded into the days. He did not believe that his father loved him; the father had the same profound disbelief in his son's affections—neither could come any nearer. They wanted the uniting touch of Gemma's sanguine faith in both.

As Clement grew up, and as manly tastes and habits drove out the boyish fancies, a sudden change came in the relationship between them. Louis Dumaresq, when scarcely more than a boy, had been saved from all gross sins and temptations, not only by a fastidious taste and a pure nature, but also by falling in love with an innocent, confiding girl. He had gradually forgotten even the flavor of temptation, and had hardened into disgust and contempt for the vices of society. He tried to be just, but it was very difficult for him to comprehend the leaning to "pleasant sin"; he had a woman's coldness and purity in these things. Clement had the southern temperament, the passionate weakness, which is sometimes stronger than strength. He had the corresponding virtues which often balance such natures; he was as compassionate and tender with suffering, with little children and frail women as his father seemed hard and cold. Every one of this sort who came across him adored him, every toddling baby wanted him to take it in his arms; if any of his friends were ill or in trouble he spent himself on them. He had his mother's soft heart, none of his father's stern strength and uprightness; added to this he had the fatal temperament of genius. What could the poor boy do but go wrong? It would have been almost a miracle if he had kept straight.

Louis Dumaresq distrusted him; it was his habit to do so; but he had no proof to bring against him till he was more than twenty-one. He had his studio now, which he shared with two friends, and he was less at home than ever. His father spent scarcely any of his now inconsiderable salary on himself; it nearly all went to make a painter of Clement. The young fellow still had lessons, or rather painted under his old master, an artist of some genius and a great deal of skill, a man of the world, shrewd, kindly, and practical. One evening this gentleman called to see Mr. Dumaresq. Clement's father felt that there was a storm in the air. His anxious mind forecast calamity; he only waited for what he was sure was coming. After preliminaries of attempted small talk, Mr. Kennedy cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. Mr. Dumaresq glanced across at him calmly, with an air of philosophical stoicism which helped on the necessary communication.

"You have something to say about Clement, I fancy?"

"Yes. I thought I ought, as you are obliged to be so much away, and are, of course, quite unaware of his doings. I take a great interest in him, as you know. He is the cleverest pupil I ever had, one who ought to do something in life; but I am afraid he is going a bit wrong."

"Yes," Dumaresq said coolly, as if he were discussing a stranger; "and in what direction? You will oblige me deeply by being explicit, Mr. Kennedy."

"Well, he is neglecting his work. He has half a score of pictures unfinished, and hardly works half a dozen hours a week. I am afraid he has taken up with a loose set. I fear he takes more stimulant than he can stand, and you must be aware that neither his excitable brain nor his health can do with that; in the evenings I have reason to believe he often plays in a rather objectionable concert hall, and I fancy—I am not sure, but I have my fears—there is some entanglement with a girl who sings there. I am very sorry, very much concerned about all this. He has such promise, and I am fond of the lad."

"I am very much indebted to you for your kindness and confidence," the other said in the same level voice. "I am afraid I have not much influence, but what I can do I will. I was fearing there was something wrong."

"You won't be too severe on him," urged the good-natured, easy-going painter, unconsciously taking the tone of a father appealing to a judge. "There is so much good feeling about him, and no one can help liking him."

"That is just the worst of it. Feeling without principle is only another snare. I will do my best; and I thank you."

As he stood up to go Mr. Kennedy looked long at the Claude. "You are lucky to have such a gem," he said with the enthusiasm of knowledge. "It is by far the most beautiful specimen I have seen of him. If ever you are hard up and want to sell let me know. Lord Enderby would give anything almost for it."

"I shall never part with it. When I go it may be for sale," Mr. Dumaresq answered briefly.

"No, Gemma," he said to himself, as he stood before the hearth alone, "I shall keep your legacy as long as I live; it may be the only thing left me of my old life with you some day. Your other legacy will give me many a heartache yet."

He went out that very evening in some hope of finding Clement at the studio, where he slept occasionally, as he had not come home. He was not there, however; there was nothing but confusion and silence in the great, untidy room, covered with a litter of artistic properties, uncleaned palettes, unfinished sketches, tobacco pipes, and the lay figure standing in an outrageous attitude, with a soft felt hat cocked rakishly over one of her eyes. The violin case was gone. This was a significant fact after what Mr. Kennedy had said. Mr. Dumaresq hesitated a few minutes over his next step, and decided suddenly upon it. He went to Mr. Kennedy's house, and sent up a note asking for the name of the concert hall he had mentioned. On receiving it he took a hansom at once, and went there. He had never entered such a place in his life; but out of the atmosphere of smoke and bright gas and general rowdiness he took away some distinct impressions. One, the first that forced itself upon him, was the individuality of one of the singers; he felt, he knew not why, that this was the girl of whom Mr. Kennedy had spoken. She was small, plump and pretty, with a cloudy frizz of golden hair round an almost childish—not at all bad—face. She was not in any way immodest or objectionable; she looked, on the contrary, fresh to it all and half frightened. She had a sweet, clear voice like a lark's, worthy of something better than the silly comic song, which was not, however, worse than silly. She seemed now and then to glance off the stage; there was an air of consciousness about her as if some one were watching her. Dumaresq knew who it was when Clement came from that direction, looking flushed, excited, handsome, with his violin. His father groaned inwardly, and let his head fall on his breast. Gemma's boy here, and like this! He played an odd, wild, eerie sort of tune, getting faster and faster till it finished in a kind of skirl. He was applauded, but not half as much as the pretty girl, whom the people round about called "Tillie."

Mr. Dumaresq wrote on a bit of paper the following words:

"I have heard you play here to-night, and have seen Mr. Kennedy. I must ask you to come to-morrow evening, if I do not see you before then.—L. D."

Folding this note and directing it, he made his way out, and leaving the note with the doorkeeper to give his son, he went home. He did not put any of his sensations into shape; he took up this new trouble with stern patience, as he had accepted his others, half proud of his power of self-control. He expected nothing but misery in life, he told himself, and nothing now could take him by surprise; but he meant to do what he could for the boy, for his mother's sake. He more than half despised him, but there was, after all, a tenderer thought at the bottom. He tried to foster this by looking at the sepia sketch, which Clement had made years ago to please him, that evening when he played the little air which he had christened the "Claude," after the picture. "There is good in him, there is good in him," the father repeated as he held the sketch before his eyes. "If his mother had lived it might have come to more. I never could get any hold upon him. That is part of the curse which has been upon me since she went."

CHAPTER III.

The following evening, after a solitary and barely tasted dinner, Louis Dumaresq sat stern, silent, and immovable, awaiting with that resolute patience with which he steeled his spirit, the visit he had demanded from his son. The room was but dimly lighted; his face was in deep shadow by the picture above his head, over the sunshine of which a sudden eclipse seemed to have fallen. Nine, 10, 11 o'clock came. Dumaresq had told himself it was no use; Clement meant to keep away; but just as he was putting his watch back in his pocket he heard the door-bell, and then a minute afterwards a stumbling step up the stairs, a rattle at the handle, and the young man came in. He was highly flushed, his eyes had a strange glitter; he seemed to bring in with him an odor of cigars and wine. A keen shiver of repulsion and digust, a pain like a knife ran through his father's heart, as he looked at him steadily with a pale, cold face, as utterly dissimilar to the other as it is possible for father's and son's to be. His voice sounded clear, cutting, and steady as he said:

"Sit down, Clement; I have a good deal to say to you."

"Thanks, I'd rather stand," the other said with a reckless laugh, leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece and looking at Dumaresq with a defiant, sneering face. It was champagne that inspired the recklessness and the sneer. An hour or two hence despondency and self-hatred might take their place.

"I can't stay long; they are waiting for me. We've got a supper party on; but I thought I'd better come round and see what you wanted."

"It was very kind of you," the other said with a curious little smile. The tolerance, the kindness he had been trying to force upon himself had vanished in the long, dreary waiting. He felt now almost an abhorrence of the dissipated lad. "And from whom have you come to honor me so far?"

"From the concert hall in —— street," the other retorted, fiercely. "Where you followed me, I suppose, last night."

"Do you go there, then, every evening? And what is your attraction in such an utterly mean, vulgar and inconceivably stupid place of amusement?"

"Every one is not like you. I don't suppose you were ever young and fond of pleasure."

"Is that pleasure? I beg your pardon; it did not strike me in that light! So you go only for the pleasure you find there—the refined songs, the costumes, and general tom-foolery. I should hardly have thought it could be so fascinating, even to twenty-two years humanity. Certainly, if that is enjoyment, I never should have found it—not even when I was young. So there is no special attraction?"

There was a moment's silence; the two stared at each other—on the one side with looks of cold, averse displeasure, on the other with fierce, but half-frightened glances. Clement broke suddenly on the stillness in a hoarse voice, from which all the music seemed departed. "Yes—there is—I'm not going to beat about the bush, for I believe you know. There's a girl there I'm in love with—I can't get on without her."

"A young person with frizzled hair, who sings idiotic nonsense?" his father said in a low, iced tone, stroking his thin, hollow cheek with a hand that trembled.

"Don't provoke me," the young man burst out with a sudden blaze of fury. "I'm half mad to-night—I can't stand much."

"More than half drunk," his father returned with contempt. "Let's make an end of this. You are going to the bad, or gone; you are throwing away time, money, talent, opportunity; you are going the path that ends in perdition. I can't stop you; I can't help it; I've done what I could for you—everything. I have kept myself straight that you might have every chance. I've borne and forborne. What is it you want now? What delirium of folly has got hold of you?"

"I want money; I must have money," the boy cried fiercely, the wine firing his brain; the coldness and scorn in his father's looks and voice helping it to madden him and make his moods into a fury almost insane. "Every one says you have heaps of it, and I must have it."

"I have kept myself on the verge of poverty that you should have enough," the other returned bitterly. "I cannot give what I have not; and if I could I would not—to dissipate on sots and loose women!"

Clement started forward with an oath; he held up his cane almost as if he would strike his father, who looked at him coolly, without a muscle quivering in his fine, white face.

"You cannot threaten it out of me," he said in a voice unlike his own.

Clement let his arm fall a moment, and turned half away. As he did so his glance caught on the Claude over the mantelpiece; he pointed at it with his stick.

"You ask where you can get money," he said sneeringly. "If you cared to save me at the expense of your hobby, there are thousands, they say, locked up in that picture."

"You think I would sell my Claude for you and your fancy for a low girl?"

The words were scarcely out of his lips when, in a moment, a thing was done that left its mark on both their lives forever.

Clement himself did not realize what the madness of the drunken impulse of the instant had done till he saw that the picture—his mother's heirloom—was forever ruined, thrust through and through with a madman's frenzy of destruction.

He stood still as a statue, staring at his work, white and cold and sobered with a ghastly shock of shame. As for his father, he sat motionless, not speaking, looking silently at the destruction of the comfort and hope of his life; not the destruction of the picture, but the destruction of something a thousand times dearer and more sacred. The boy Gemma had left him—this, too, was a ruin, like the stabbed canvas. The thrust seemed to him to have gone through his heart as well? Strangely enough, though, all the contempt, all the disgust were gone; only a vast pity and and an unavailable ache of forgiveness remained; but he could not speak, his tongue, which had lighted readily enough on reproach, was still and dumb Before he could move or say a word, the room was empty; Clement had turned as if he felt the lash of the Furies, and was gone. His father started after him, called in vain. One door after another slammed, and Dumaresq was alone, standing stricken under the ruined picture—the type of the disaster and dismay which had come upon him in a moment.

"All that she left me; all that she left me!" he groaned out, stretching his arms above his head with a piteous appeal to the darkness and silence. "Was it for this I was born? O Gemma, my Gemma, why did you leave us to such a life as this?"

CHAPTER IV.

Seven years had gone by somehow—seven long, monotonous, desolate years. Louis Dumaresq had not thought of making any change in them, he seemed incapable of the effort. He came home to the silent rooms every night and sat as he used to do. Even the Claude remained in its frame, though its beauty was gone forever, and the holes in it would have astonished and horrified any one, if there had been any to see it. But Lonis Dumaresq lived a hermit, and saw no one.

The only effort he had made beyond just the necessary routine of his work was in trying to get a clue to the whereabouts of his son. He inquired everywhere. He advertised; he employed detectives; he visited every possible acquaintance who might know something of him; but it was in vain. Clement Dumaresq had gone under, as so many young men do—as completely disappearing as if drowned in Lethe. The only thing his father could discover was that at the same time the girl "Tillie" had vanished also; the concert hall knew her no more. He had made some discoveries about her, and they had given him a pang of self-reproach. Though she sang at such a place, and mixed with the most doubtful company, no one had anything bad to say of the girl. The manager of the rooms declared that she was a "good little thing," kept herself respectable. worked hard, was kind to people, and would "stand no nonsense." He was very sorry to lose her, and had an idea she went off with the young fellow who was so clever at the fiddle, and who called himself Dumas—he thought they were married and gone abroad, and had no doubt they would get on if the young man kept steady, as both were uncommonly clever.

Mr. Dumaresq took back this information, and pondered it in his way. He seemed to see how his words about this girl, whom Clememt loved perhaps truly and purely, must have enraged him, half-wild as he was already on that fatal night. He well understood why he had disappeared after what had happened. Clement had never believed in his father's affection or indulgence; he knew his severe idea of right and wrong, and his extreme fondness for the poor Claude. After such a scene Clement would feel cut off forever from his father's sympathy, for he little knew his heart. Indeed, Dumaresq had hardly known his own. He would not have believed beforehand how entirely resentment and anger would have died, even at the moment of the greatest injury done him, and that a woman's tenderness and inexhaustible pity would take possession of it instead. It was as if the gentle mother had given him her spirit. He put away the remembrance of the last phase of his boy's life; he dwelt on his childhood and growing youth, on his brightness, the flash of genius in him, his soft heart and caressing ways; the old dog, of which he had been fond, crept into his father's heart, though he had never cared for animals; the old apple-woman to whom Clement used to give sixpences and chat with about "Oireland" in his winning way, was surprised at the grave, gray gentleman stopping to talk and giving her a shilling over and over again. When he sat alone in the dim room he recalled the boyish voice and laugh, the music of the little old violin, the tune which he called the "Claude tune," haunted his ear with a half-soothing persistence. The story of the son who came home, and of the father who fell on his neck and kissed him, lay at his heart.

One day in the beginning of December, about 5 o'clock, Louis Dumaresq came home. It was a Saturday, and he was earlier than usual. He had nothing to do with his time, and did not care to spend it anywhere but in that old room, where so many hours had wore themselves away. Whenever he opened the door he could not help, though he tried to do so sometimes, letting his glances fall on the spoilt picture. It had one gash through the sparkling water, another through the group of dancing girls; yet the light still caught it and brought out the soft mellowness of the coloring. He got his books—he was a great reader of all kinds of curious literature—and, finding in one of them a subject which was suggestive to him, he got a piece of paper and sketched in black and white.

He was rather absorbed in his drawing, which took shape that pleased him, and whistled over it very softly, as was his habit when he was designing. Suddenly the low whistle stopped. He raised his head quickly, and listened with a curious intensity of expression. It was only the distant sound of a street-musician's fiddle that he caught. What made all the muscles of his face quiver as the air was faintly borne in to him?

He started to his feet, ran to the window and threw it open, letting in the damp and smoky air, and kneeling on the window-sill, stretched his head out, trying not only to hear but to see. The tune was distinct now. It was a light and merry one, but somehow the very lightness of it made it the more pathetic in the misty grayness of the London street. It was the tune which Clement had made years ago—"to fit the picture," as he said. Dumaresq's heart beat audibly to himself as the notes were repeated more distinctly. He knew in a moment that only one person in the world could play that tune, and that the time had come at last for which he had hungered these weary years.

He left the window, forgetting to shut it, left the room-door open, too, so that the draft made the lamp on the table flicker and flare. He ran down stairs, as he had never run since he was a boy, opened the great heavy hall-door, and went straight up to the wandering musician. He only saw his boy; he never even noticed that a dark-eyed, curly-headed child was holding on to his coat with both her little hands.

"Clement—you've come home—at last, my boy!" the father panted out, breathless with his haste. "I've looked for you; wanted you all this while—come in—come in—out of this cold!"

He had one hand in his, the other was holding the violin. He clasped the arm, however, since the hand was full. He drew him toward the open door behind them. It was Clement; a moment would have satisfied him of this if he had ever doubted; but seven years of want and folly had wasted him to a shadow. Gemma's great eyes, as they had been in the last months of her life, looked out of his thin, brown, handsome young face, and if he had needed any appeal, would have made his father's heart yearn over him.

"But stay, father," the young man said, drawing back a moment to bring forward the little figure half hidden behind him. "Here is another come to ask you to take her in."

Dumaresq stooped and lifted her in his arms without a word. He led the way, carrying the child, who trembled a little, but neither cried nor spoke. Clement followed him; they went silently up the broad, dark staircase, silently entered the room from which the young man had rushed seven years ago. Dumaresq drew the old-fashioned sofa close to the fire, stirred it to a blaze, shut the window, and placed the child gently in one corner. Clement sank on the other; he was too exhausted in body for mental emotion; he only glanced up once at the ruined picture. The little girl called out with delight at the warmth, and spread out her eager little hands to it. She was still shuddering with the cold and with a certain sensitive timidity which was not exactly shyness. Dumaresq stood a moment to look at her as the firelight flashed on her small, oval face, and was reflected in her wonderful dark eyes. He gave a sort of stifled cry at last—a hungry cry of delight.

"Clement," he said, "do you know? Do you see? She has your mother's face!"

And kneeling down on the rug before her, he took the thin little arms and put them round his neck; his gray hair touched her thick, crisp, dark curls; he kissed her passionately.

Clement looked at them with a wistful, melancholy smile.

"Yes, I saw that," he said. "I think that was why I came. I thought I would give her to you, for I shan't stay long with her, and her mother's dead. I felt that I must come home and tell you."

"Don't tell me anything yet," the father said, turning from the child with a gesture as if he would gladly have taken his son into his arms, too, only the long habit of reserve forbade. "I'll take it all—everything—for granted, at any rate till you're well. Everything shall stop till then."

"I shall never be well," the young man answered indifferently; "and now that I'm home, and have seen you, I don't mind about that. The child's a good child—I give her to you."

Dumaresq sat down and took her on his knee. She leaned her sleepy head on his breast; her little hand rested confidingly on his for the first time. Clement leaned back as if he had come to the end of all strength and power of endurance; not unhappy or in pain, only worn out. His deep, pathetic eyes were fixed on the picture. He said, in a low, dreamy voice: "Ah, how often I've thought of it! The poor Claude you were so fond of; I couldn't face you again when I came to myself—it was too much!"

"Clement!" his father cried in an anguish of reproach. "As if it were more to me than you?"

"But, you see, I did not know. I thought I had quite done for myself. I did not know till now what you were, father. But something told me to come and bring the child, I believe. I thought she would make up for it all; for the loss of that. I call her Claudia."

Dumaresq stretched out the hand that had held the child, whose eyes had closed on his breast, and took his son's in a close and tender grasp. They looked at each other sadly, but fondly, and the long distrust, the unavailing remorse, the folly and the waste were forgotten in the first touch of souls which had never met before.

So without any formal explanations, and with but few words of any kind, Clement and his child were taken to his father's heart and home. Each felt that it was not for long, but it was a peaceful and a gentle pause before the parting. Clement watched, as day after day he lost a little of his poor remaining strength, how the child grew and flourished like a happily transplanted flower, and he saw how she had won her way at once into the warmest niche of his father's heart. She made the quiet rooms gay with her innocent laughter; she had a thousand pretty, winning ways and tricks of loving. A hand-to-mouth struggle for existence had given her docility and patience; and she was born with a sunny, loving heart. Louis Dumaresq forgot the weary years between at times, and almost fancied that this was his own little daughter—Gemma's daughter. His work was light now, for he had a purpose in it. His money went to buy comforts for Clement; pretty frocks, toys, trinkets for the little one. She never found him cold or stern; he had not a word of repression for her; he had nothing but gentle looks and caressing tones—the proper nourishment for her sensitive, tender little soul. It was Clement who was quiet and silent now; his days of storm and sunshine were over; he waited calmly, and felt only tired. He had done little with his gift of genius, but he could scarcely regret it; he was too languid for regrets. Only one last work he had set himself to do, and for that he braced all that was left him of energy, and forced his weary spirits to his secret task. When it was done and he put down his brush, he said: "Now I can rest; there's nothing left to do."

That evening Dumaresq found his little Claudia waiting on the landing for him, trembling with eagerness, which quivered all through her finely-strung frame. She seized his hand.

"Oh, I've been listening and waiting for you so long I thought you would never come! There's a surprise for you in there—father's surprise—and I've never told. I said I never would till it was done. Come, come, let me show it to you!"

He followed her as she pulled him in with all her little strength, hurrying his steps. He looked first, as he always did now, with anxious glances at his son, who was lying back on the sofa with his arms clasped behind his head. It gave him a pang to see how every day left him whiter, thinner, more brilliant-eyed. There were surely tears, too, behind the drooping lids. But Claudia drew his attention away. "Look up," she cried, "over there. Not at father; the surprise is there!" And her little finger pointed above the mantelpiece where the Claude had hung, where the frame still hung, but inclosing no longer the spoilt landscape with its wrecked beauty. The frame held now a little wistful face surrounded by a mass of curls, an oval face with soft, deep, tender eyes, and a half-open, half-smiling mouth.

"Clement!" his father said, and no more; his voice choked, and he put his hand over his eyes. Claudia pulled at the other, crying in disappointed tones:

"Don't you like it? Aren't you pleased? It's me, your little Claudia. I've kept the secret to surprise you. Father's painted me a little every day, and I've sat so stiff. Don't you like me there, instead of the poor, pretty picture father spoilt when he was naughty, and he was so sorry about? Don't you like it, grandfather?"

He stooped and kissed her.

"Yes, yes, my little Claudia; so much I can not talk about it. It is the sweetest picture in the world."

He left the child, who turned well pleased to her doll, and sat down beside Clement, putting his arm half way round his shoulders, thus half embracing him.

"I could not bear to see it always like that," the son whispered; "it was too hateful a reminder. I thought, I fancied, if I could put her there instead, you would be pleased. Claudia instead of Claude," he added, with a curious little smile. "Will it do instead, father?"

"God bless you, boy! You've made me very happy, and better days are coming—you can paint still. You'll make a man yet."

He did not see the silent shake of the head. Clement said nothing; but he knew that the shadow was deepening; that his brush was laid down forever; that the rest he wanted was close at hand.

"I have made it all up," he said to himself with weary satisfaction: "I leave him Claudia."